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ALLORA & CALZADILLA: PUERTO RICAN LIGHT

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CLOSE-UP

ON AND OFF ART

IRENE V. SMALL ON ALLORA & CALZADILLA'S *PUERTO RICAN LIGHT (CUEVA VIENTOS)*, 2015

This page and opposite: **Allora & Calzadilla, *Puerto Rican Light (Cueva Vientos)*, 2015,** solar-powered batteries and charger, plywood crate, Dan Flavin's *Puerto Rican light (to Jeanie Blake) 2*, 1965. Installation view, El Convento Natural Protected Area, Puerto Rico, 2015–17. Photos: Allora & Calzadilla.

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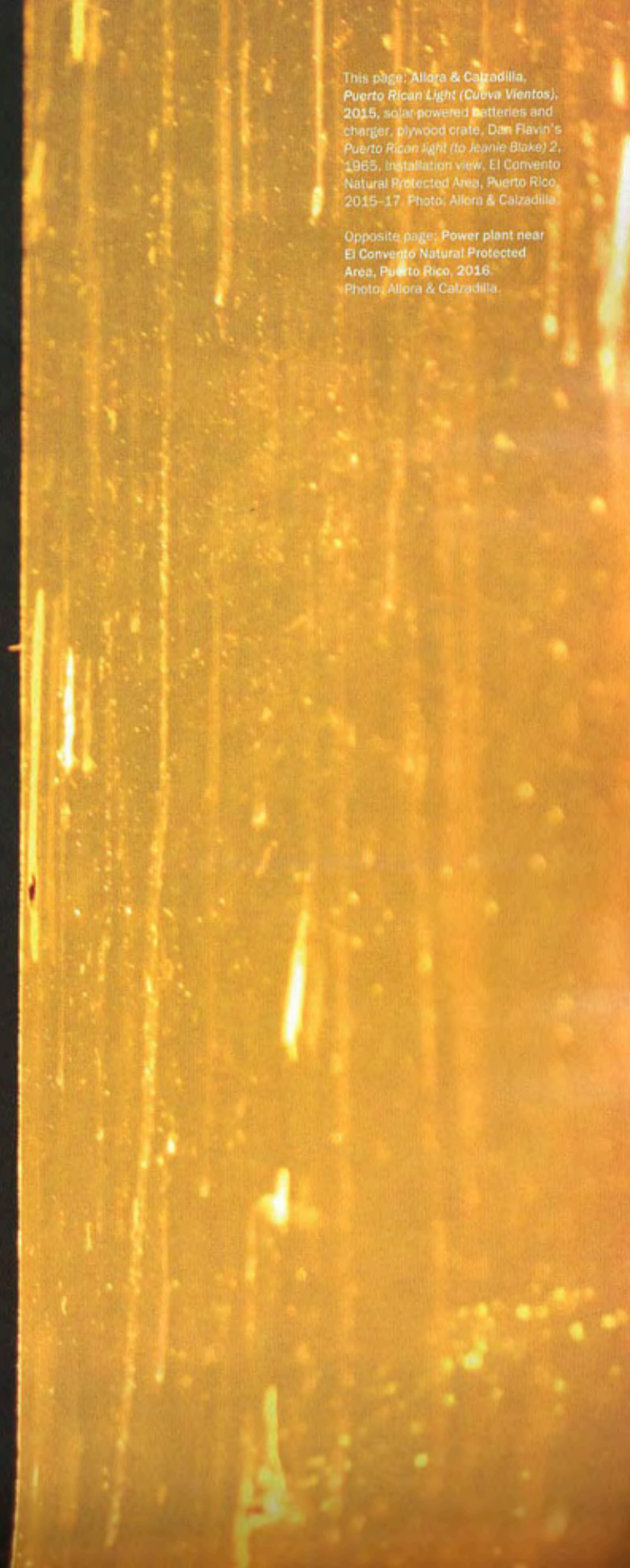

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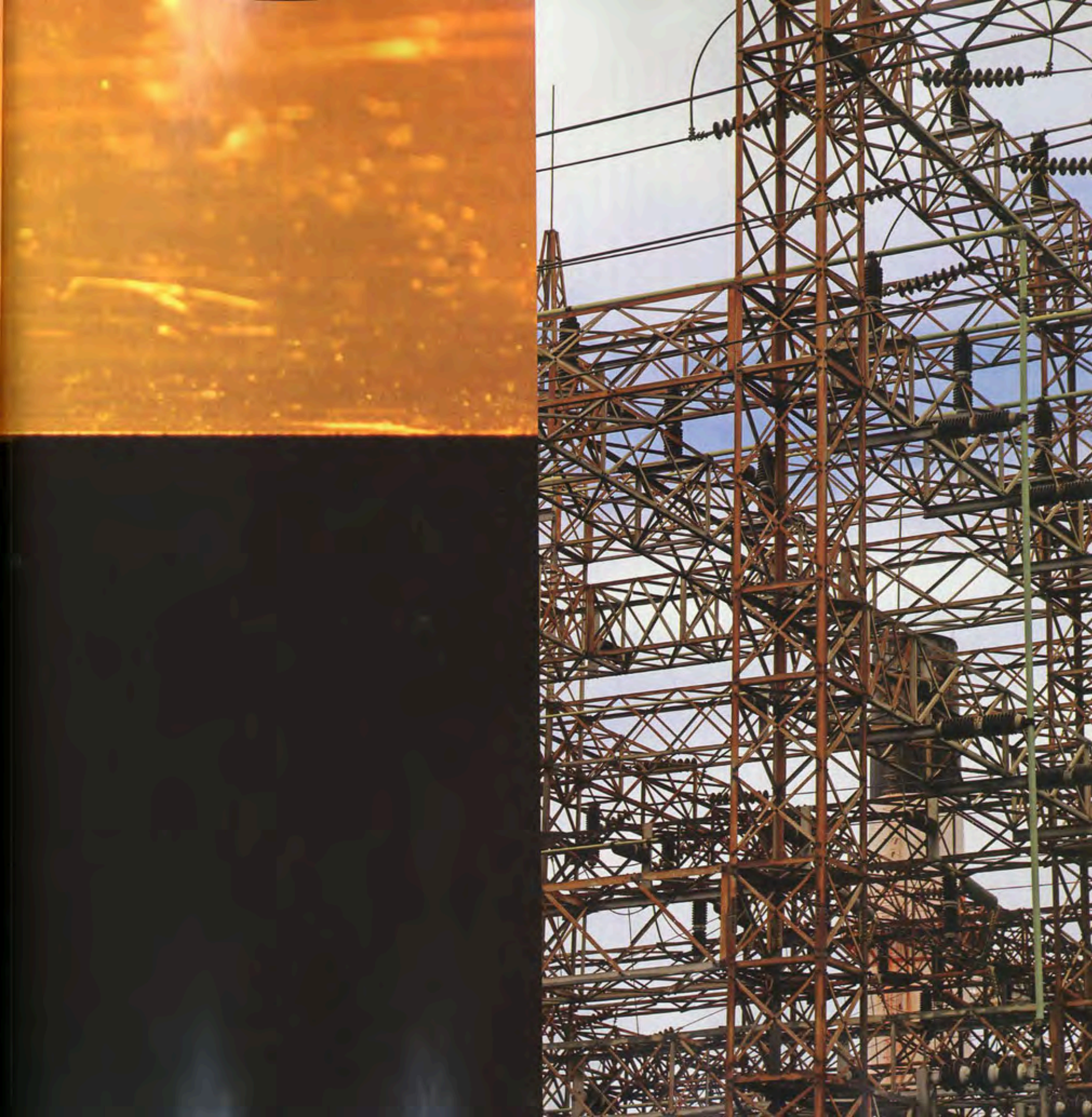
Opposite page: **Power plant near El Convento Natural Protected Area, Puerto Rico, 2016.** Photo: Allora & Calzadilla.



DEEP IN A CAVE in Puerto Rico, a light burns: The evanescent glow is that of Dan Flavin's fluorescent sculpture *Puerto Rican light (to Jeanie Blake) 2*, 1965, placed there by the artists Allora & Calzadilla in a startling transposition of time, material, and energy. Art historian Irene V. Small makes the descent to explore this numinous geopolitical network.

A TAÍNO MYTH associates the origins of earthly existence with the crepuscular return of distant ancestors to the fabled Cave of the Jagua. The sun seized on those who did not come back before dawn, transforming them into stones, birds, trees. Those remaining in the cave eventually left, relinquishing their nocturnal affinities to bats and *opías*, spirits of the dead. The condition of life as we know it, in other words, is one of belatedness, and as a consequence, we live in a diaspora formed in blinding light. In geologic time, of course, humans are also belated—staggeringly so—inhabiting Earth for only a few hundred thousand of its approximately 4.6 billion years. The limestone caves of El Convento in the southern region of Puerto Rico are some thirty-four million years old, remnants of coral reefs of the Mesozoic era. Contemporary existence attempts to eradicate the profound sensation of this belatedness through a continual, exhausting appeal to the here and now. But art provides a potent haunting, both in its anachronic character and in the figuration of its own scandalous ephemerality.

To wit, *Puerto Rican Light (Cueva Vientos)*, 2015, by San Juan–based duo Allora & Calzadilla (Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla), is both a specter and an homage. The work consists of a site-specific installation of Dan Flavin's 1965 sculpture *Puerto Rican light (to Jeanie Blake) 2* deep within a cave, Cueva Vientos, which forms part of the El Convento system. Flavin's work is, in turn, illuminated by means of solar-powered batteries renewed by the blazing sun of the Puerto Rican day. The colored fluorescent-light tubes Flavin used for his works were only patented in 1963, with several colors ceasing production in the 1980s. Once emanating novelty and technological standardization, they are now industrial artifacts, their lives as works of art scrupulously extended by means of stockpiled replacements, custom-fabricated replicas, humidity-controlled storage chambers. To power an original Flavin by means of the sun is to nest this historical finitude within the ever more pressing, but sublime finitude of the Anthropocene. It is also to comprehend the configuration of these two temporalities as a question about human action as much as a critique thereof.

Allora & Calzadilla have orchestrated versions of *Puerto Rican Light* before, first at the Americas Society in New York (where it was commissioned by Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy) and then at Tate Modern, both in 2003. In each case, they used a smaller iteration of Flavin's work, *Puerto Rican light (to Jeanie Blake)*, 1965 (which appeared on the December 1966 cover of *Artforum*), and constructed a temporally discontinuous nonsite suspended between the space of the exhibition and the stored battery power of solar panels, previously charged off-site in Puerto Rico. Cueva Vientos closes the circuit, electrifying Flavin's larger, second version of the work with the literal power of its metaphoric source on-site. But what is a source, what is a site? Flavin's title was inspired by a remark by Jeanie Blake, a gallery assistant who noted that the sculpture reminded her of "Puerto Rican lights." Ostensibly, Blake was referring to New York's Puerto Rican Day Parade, but the sculpture's palette of red, pink, and yellow intimates a more amorphous string of associations, ranging from tropical sunsets to piña coladas (invented the same year colored fluorescents appeared, 1963). The parade was itself something of a novelty, a by-product of the dramatic surge in Puerto Rican immigration to New York City in the 1950s and '60s, spurred by the manufacturing and export initiative Operation Bootstrap. The electrical current that would normally activate the gaseous contents of a fluorescent tube, meanwhile, represents an even more diffuse network, a single point in a vast infrastructure of governmental and corporate relations. The conceptual audacity of Flavin's light works lies in no small part in

Cover of *Artforum*, December 1966. Dan Flavin, *Puerto Rican light (to Jeanie Blake)*, 1965.

gathering this tentacular web and transforming it into an evanescent envelope of space—a glow, heat, and hum—that, quite unlike the invisible network that looms beyond it, can be experienced at bodily scale.

Allora & Calzadilla's corresponding gambit is to similarly appropriate an object and a network, but to conceive of the resulting installation in distinct materialist and phenomenological terms. In Cueva Vientos, solar energy decouples the work from the grid and provides a renewable form of autonomy (during an island-wide power outage last September, *Puerto Rican light [to Jeanie Blake] 2* radiated on). But it also reconnects the work to a wider set of dependencies concerning the geopolitics of energy, capital, ecology, and human life. Importantly, *Puerto Rican Light (Cueva Vientos)* is a commission of the Dia Art Foundation, whose commitments to Minimalist artists such as Flavin, Carl Andre, and Donald Judd run deep. Significantly, too, the foundation owns the Flavin work in question, and has carefully managed visitorship, in collaboration with Para la Naturaleza, the nonprofit unit of the Conservation Trust of Puerto Rico, much in the way it maintains off-site works such as Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, and Walter De Maria's *Lightning Field*, 1977. In Beacon and New York City, the shells of factories and warehouses provide apt backdrops for much Minimalist and post-Minimalist work, itself created just as the industries these architectures once housed were becoming obsolete. For Allora & Calzadilla, the correlation between art and industrialization becomes explicit—albeit through a process of defamiliarization and displacement. En route from San Juan to Cueva Vientos, one passes abandoned sugar-processing plants and leaking petrochemical complexes, each evidence of the economic asymmetry that continues to structure Puerto Rico's relation to the mainland. Obsolescence emerges as a historical rather than aesthetic frame, one that admits the deep entanglement of colonialism, capitalism, and industrialization. Once we enter the El Convento cave system, our temporal frame dilates, and we trace the reverse route of the ancient Taíno, ascending through a forest of primeval trees to caves populated by bats and boa constrictors, seeking shade and sun in turn.

The notion of Allora & Calzadilla's intervention as a kind of artistic killing of the father is a cynicism impossible to maintain upon encountering the work in situ. For to arrive at *Puerto Rican light (to Jeanie Blake) 2* as the apex of this journey is nothing short of a revelation. Contrary to every possible expectation or explication, the luminous ribbons of light—in actuality emanating from a source that is only eight feet tall—hold the presence of the cave's soaring 250-foot height with a profound and generous reciprocity. And if the cave's darkness subtly diminishes the spatial diffusion of light we have come to expect from a gallery installation, this environmental interplay returns in the fluorescent lights' incalculable interaction with the faint, fluctuating glow of sunlight that penetrates the cave by means of a naturally occurring oculus. This is indebtedness as an aesthetic and phenomenological relation. It is also a means to place ourselves at odds with our own time.

Flavin once said that the temporariness of art was inevitable, and imagined a scenario in which his work would be declared void upon his death. "All posthumous interpretations are less. I know this. So I would rather see it all disappear into the wind," he mused. "Take it all away." Cueva Vientos, Cave of the Winds. As Marcel Mauss taught us, the gift is another form of debt. □

"Puerto Rican Light (Cueva Vientos)," curated by Yasmil Raymond and Manuel Cirauqui, is on view through September 23 at Cueva Vientos, Guayanilla–Peñuelas, Puerto Rico.

IRENE V. SMALL IS THE AUTHOR OF *HÉLIO OITICICA: FOLDING THE FRAME* (UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, 2016). SHE IS CURRENTLY AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE HAROLD WILLIS DODDS PRESIDENTIAL PRECEPTOR AT PRINCETON UNIVERSITY.

Visit our archive at artforum.com/inprint to read the cover feature "Some Remarks" by Dan Flavin (December 1966).

This page: **El Convento Natural Protected Area, Puerto Rico, 2016.** Photo: Allora & Calzadilla.

Opposite page: **Allora & Calzadilla, *Puerto Rican Light (Cueva Vientos)*, 2015**, solar-powered batteries and charger, plywood crate. Dan Flavin's *Puerto Rican light (to Jeanie Blake)* 2, 1965, installation view, El Convento Natural Protected Area, Puerto Rico, 2015–17. Photo: Allora & Calzadilla.